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John Birch Society

The John Birch Society is a national, semi-secret, organization founded by a 61-year-old candy manufacturer from Massachusetts, Robert Welch, who is quoted as saying that Dwight Eisenhower, Milton Eisenhower, the late John Foster Dulles and the head of CIA, Allen Dulles, are or were members of the Communist underground. But, he adds, his followers are not required to agree with him about that. (Any more than every member of the Nazi Party was required to underwrite every word in *Mein Kampf*). The Society, named after a Protestant missionary killed in China in 1945 and referred to by the Society as the first victim of World War III, operates, in the words of its founder, "under completely authoritative control at all levels." At least two former presidents of the National Association of Manufacturers serve on its advisory committee. There is no public accounting either of money or of membership, although a United Press International correspondent reports that there are 28 full-time employees at headquarters and "another 35 salaried persons work around the country as coordinators of member groups, and an additional 100 persons work full or almost full-time as volunteers." It is campaigning at present for the impeachment of Chief Justice Warren, but it has broader interests—repealing the income tax, withdrawal from NATO, opposition to foreign aid and the United Nations, and the social gospel. Mr. Welch believes that democracy "is merely a deceptive phrase, a weapon of demagoguery, and a perennial fraud...."

The response to this Society of the two Congressional committees concerned with the preservation of American institutions has been interesting. The House Un-American Activities Committee has suddenly developed exquisite scruples. When it was requested by Representative Hiestand (Republican from California and

a member of the Society) to launch an investigation which Mr. Hiestand was sure would dispel charges that the Society is a "dictatorial, fascist" organization, Chairman Francis Walters noted that the committee's legislative charter limits its inquiries to the diffusion of propaganda attacking the form of the US Government and said that he did not "see from the press reports anything this Society has done that would bring it within the purview of this Committee." The Senate Internal Security Subcommittee went further and made a positive judgment. Replying to all inquiries about the Society, a letter over the signature of Chairman Eastland reads: "The John Birch Society about which you asked, is known to be a conservative anti-Communist organization officially. We are happy to state that it seems to be, from our records, a patriotic organization."

If Mr. Welch were the drama critic of *The New Yorker* named Kenneth Tynan or a Nobel Prize winning physicist named Linus Pauling, it would be an altogether different matter.

Should one urge that the John Birch Society be investigated by some committee of Congress? From a constitutional point of view, the Congress has the power to investigate any alleged conspiracy which may be attempting to undermine or overthrow our form of government. But it should embark on this course only when it is persuaded that what it is investigating presents an ominous, evident danger. For the power to investigate in this area is only justified as a heroic measure.

Abominable (or silly, if you wish) as the John Birch Society is, it would be a rash man who would claim that it endangers the Republic. A nation in which about 70 million citizens recently voted for one of two men for President who, it is fair to assume, are equally repugnant to Mr. Welch, is not about to split apart. We have therefore to consider here not a constitutional but a prudential question. We have again to weigh the risks of letting the public deal with these eccentric movements in its own way, or in increasing the power of the Congress to inquire into the thoughts and activities of private organizations. We prefer to leave the job of exposure, investigation and judgment to public opinion, and to the press.